

⁹Indeed, how can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have before God on account of you?

¹⁰Night and day we are praying earnestly to see you in person and to supply what is lacking in your faith.

¹¹May God our Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹²And may the Lord increase your love and make it overflow for each other and for all people, just as ours does for you, ¹³so that he may establish your hearts as blameless in holiness before our God and Father, when our Lord Jesus comes with all his saints.

Paul and Silas had served in Thessalonica and planted the church there, beginning with many Jewish converts, God-fearing Greeks, and many prominent women. But at some point, other Jews were angry at the following and started a riot. Paul and Silas were forced by the riot to flee to Berea. But the rioters followed Paul and Silas there too, and Paul headed to Athens. When Silas and Timothy finally caught up to Paul in Athens, he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica, to spiritually support the Christians who were facing persecutions from the rioting Jews in this city. This section is important because this is Paul's prayer for his people, people in deep need of spiritual persecution. As your pastor, this is my prayer for you. But I hope as we enter another church year, this is always our prayer for ourselves too.

The first petition of our prayer is this: supply what is lacking in our faith. Paul's missionary team had deep affection for the church they had started in Thessalonica. They had a lot to give thanks to God for when it came to these Christians. Many people had been added to God's kingdom, people who were unique in many ways, but the same in the fact that they were sinners trapped in their trespasses who needed to hear about Christ. Paul rejoiced that God had rescued these Christians in Thessalonica, and that he continued to keep them close to him and his word.

But the church planters rejoiced for other reasons too. Not only had their work accomplished something in the people they'd ministered to. It had also accomplished something in themselves. They gave thanks to God because of the joy that the Thessalonians coming to faith had brought to these men. They'd been blessed to see the members of this young church come to faith before their very eyes. They'd seen the work of the Holy Spirit up close, as he had used them as vessels to pour out his message of peace on many more.

Now, Paul prayed that he might return to them and see them. He didn't want to do it so all the people could thank these men and honor the church planting team for the work they had done. Paul did not want to return for glory. He wanted to return because the work was far from over. The people knew Christ crucified and risen, but that didn't mean their faith was complete. There was still so much in God's word to be taught, more comforts to be gleaned, and more of God's will in their lives to be understood.

It would be foolish for any of us to look at our lives and say that our faith is complete. That's not to say we should live in fear that we're lacking what we need for eternal life. We know our Savior Jesus. We know the sacrifice he's made for us at the cross and the victory he won for us at the tomb. But that does not mean our faith is complete.

The thought that you know all you need to, that you're done growing, is one of the temptations the devil whispers in your ear to drive you away from Christ. His whole goal is to separate you from God's word so that you begin to question and forget the word. How many brothers and sisters have been lost from the faith because they decided their faith was mature enough? They didn't fall away right away. They didn't forget Jesus in an instant. But in being disconnected from God's word over time, their dependence on and love for Jesus changed

into dependance on self and love for the things of the world. Let it be one of our prayers that the Lord keep us connected to him and to his truths, so that we keep growing throughout the new church year in our knowledge of his word and our love for our Savior. And love is the second petition of our prayer.

The second petition of our prayer is this: increase our love. Paul knew his audience. The church in Thessalonica was in the midst of persecution. People were being mistreated and threatened. It would have been easy for the members of the church to live with a chip on their shoulders. They could see the church as their castle and hide themselves from the outside world in the cozy confines of their fellow Christians' embrace. Or they could abandon the church altogether. They could run away from their mistreatment by denouncing Jesus and denouncing their brothers and sisters in Christ. But in both of these scenarios, there is not a whole lot of love being shown. If they abandoned the church or separated themselves ever so slightly to insulate themselves from persecution, they were lacking in love for their fellow believers. But if they isolated themselves from the world, they were lacking in their concern and love for the unbelievers around them.

The season of Advent is often seen as a season of love. People are busy preparing for Christmas. There is a sense of excitement that the year's greatest celebration is right around the corner. There is more charity given than the rest of the year. People put down their weapons of hatred and dispute, if only for a few hours, to live in peace and love with one another. This is one of the few times when the prayers of Christians line up with the hopes of the unbelieving world. Can't we just have love?

But the love we receive is greater than the love we prayed for. Paul's prayer is that the believers in Thessalonica embrace each other, that they support each other as they face persecution and hardship. But their love for each other would only be possible because it was rooted in their Savior's sacrifice for them. What Jesus had done for them had set them free from sin and its punishment. He had paid the price. So now, they did not have to live in fear. No matter the threats made to them, they knew their Savior loved them.

Christ's love leads us to love other too. It leads us to love those people who are within the family of believers, but it also leads us to love those who don't know Jesus. When you know that nothing can steal what is yours in him, when you know that a house fire cannot destroy what's most important and economic downturn cannot sap what's eternal, you can live much more selflessly toward others. And you see people in a different light too. You see them not as competitors for resources or people to make deals and negotiate with in life, but as souls redeemed by Christ crucified. Let it be another prayer that we show people the Savior's love in this season, and when the opportunity presents itself, share the good news that give us hope.

The third and final petition of our prayer is: establish our hearts. Paul's final plea was that God moves the hearts of the Thessalonians to live and to act in that love he prayed for before. His prayer was that they align their lives according to God's will and purpose. Again, this is built on the love Christ has shown to his people, but that doesn't mean it's easy. For the Thessalonians, aligning their lives with God's design would not be free from blowback. Those people that drove Paul out of Thessalonica and kept the pressure on the believers there would not have been all too accepting of the local Christians living out from under the Jewish law and all its regulations. There would have been the temptation to just conform to the way of the world around them, no matter how it related to God's commands.

We must be aware of God's design as well. We must understand that in many places, we have Christian freedom to do this thing or that. But God has also created us to function and interact with others in somewhat specific ways. And when we don't live in the mold God cast us in, we are going to have problems. And even when we try and deny the realities of these problems, they still exist.

Take growing up in a single parent household for instance. By almost every metric, kids that grow up without a mom or a dad usually have an uphill battle in life. This is not to place blame on these kids or ignore the fact that sometimes that child has one parent because God took the other home, but we can look at God's word and the order of creation and say that God's gifts of marriage and the nuclear family are part of God's good design for flourishing.

Or look at the person who tries to keep God at arm's length. They want him close enough that he's there when they want him and far enough away that their consciences are not pricked when they don't. They may come to church at Christmas and Easter to keep up appearances. But they are rarely in contact with word and sacrament. They wonder why they deal with so many troubles in life, and they blame God for all the hurting. Again, God's design is that people hear his voice. His design is to maintain a relationship with them. But the fool finds it wiser to live closer to the world than to God.

Let me give one last instance. A man becomes too invested in his hobbies. He plays golf too much, he spends too much time at the bar, or he gets active in local, state, or federal politics. He cares about his hobby, and what a blessing it is that God gives us hobbies for pleasure! But this man's hobbies come at the expense of his wife and kids. His wife feels like she's always second fiddle. The kids grow up jealous and bitter about the hobby, because in their eyes this is dad's most loved child. If only God told us how to prioritize these responsibilities is life! If only he communicated what matters should be of highest importance in our lives! Of course, he does.

It's one thing for us to say we love God and others. It's another thing to go out and live for God and for others. Unfortunately, we will never live perfectly in the mold God has set for us. That doesn't mean we should stop trying to live by God's design for our lives, but it does mean that this is not where our salvation is found. As we've said many times already, our salvation comes from Jesus. His love sets us free from sin and death, and it motivates us to love him and others. That love comes from hearts that have been "established as blameless in holiness before our God." Our last prayer is that God uses our lives to glorify him and the orderliness of his creation.

As we begin a new church year looking forward to Jesus' coming on Christmas and the second coming he promises to make on the last day, may our ultimate prayer be to be kept in Christ in all we think, say, and do! Amen.